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ABSTRACT

A four-year ethnographic study was conducted at St. Olaf College and examined six assumptions about student attitudes toward writing. The study, involving administration of the Writers Block instrument, writing samples, and several interviews with three students over their 4 years in college, evaluated the following assumptions: (1) that once students learn the value of writing and revising, they will do it; (2) that emphasis on the process is more likely to produce the instructor's definition of good writing; (3) that revision is the site for growth in writing and learning; (4) that students will improve at identifying the rhetorical situation; (5) that students' confidence and competence will grow over time and practice; and (6) that students will come to find writing satisfying as they are successful. Several of the assumptions did not hold up to scrutiny from the perspective of these students' behavior. Preliminary conclusions suggest that in the face of student pragmatism, faculty will need to ask themselves what their goals are for students in their courses. Do they want students to learn to examine issues and data in the same analytical, inquiring mode they do, or are they more interested in having them look up information and produce "correct" academic writing. If the thought process is more important, then instructors need to look at what types of assignments are most effective. (TB)

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Reexamining Writing Requirements Across the Curriculum: Assignments and Assumptions

Linda Hunter

ED 382 970

My perspective on writing requirements across the curriculum at St. Olaf changes frequently. One of my job titles is Director of the Academic Support Center and Writing Place, our campus writing center. When our tutors are occupied, I often help students with papers from across the college. I also teach in the English department, both the developmental course for students not prepared for the regular English 111 and the English 111 course itself. A few years ago I began to wonder about the connections among these elements in students' writing experience at St. Olaf.

When I began a four year study of three students writing across the curriculum several years ago, I had a number of basic assumptions, not all to the same degree, of course, but they were my bedrock of instruction. You may think that they were naive, but I did at least hope that they were true:

1. That once students learn the value of writing and revising, they will do it.

2. That emphasis on the process is more likely to produce the instructor's definition of good writing.

3. That revision is an important site for growth in writing and learning.

College writing programs assume some outcomes of students' growth in writing during their college years:

4. That students will improve at identifying the rhetorical situations and will be able to write in a variety of them.

5. That students' confidence and competence will grow over time and practice.

And here is one more that I knew was romantic:

6. That students will come to find writing satisfying as they are successful.

At this point, I am less sure of these assumptions, at least of some of them.

This essay is based on that study of three students who began their college careers in my developmental English class (English 110). I wanted to understand more about the complexity of individual students' experiences as they wrote their way through college, both in and out of the classroom. I was particularly interested in the question of transferability of strategies from my class and the required English 111 course to their other classes. Our second writing component was called the Advanced Writing Component (AWC), a course emphasizing writing taught across the college. While the faculty who taught these courses may or may not have taken a workshop in teaching writing, their focus was expected to be on the content of the history, philosphy,

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or biology course. For that course, students were required to write three formal papers of at least 1000 words, evaluated "for form as well as content."

While instructors in AWC courses were also "required" to discuss how papers were to be written in their courses, I wondered how the students from my class would deal with the complexities of those assignments. I also wondered if my assumptions about their transferring the strategies they'd learned would hold up.

FRAMEWORK FOR STUDY

Kevin, Erica, and Jill were placed in my developmental English course on the basis of a one-hour essay test, having been previously screened by their standardized test scores, high school grades in English, and/or their admissions essay. Jill's SAT scores were the strongest in the verbal portion, 43. Erica and Kevin had the same score, 36. However, the standardized test scores only tell a fraction of the story. I chose to follow these three students through their writing experiences for their four years of college because of their varied academic backgrounds and attitudes toward writing. Jill came from a large suburban high school, Erica from a private high school in St. Paul, and Kevin from a small town high school in southern Minnesota.

Some predictions could have been made from the results of the Writer's Block questionnaire administered to several sections of first year students that year. Of the three, only Erica checked that she "almost always likes having the opportunity to express ideas in writing," but she was the least likely to "wait till I've found just the right phrase." Only Kevin checked that he usually handed papers in on time. Jill, who seemed to have the most success in writing, checked that she often ran over deadlines and found writing an unpleasant experience. However, she did have more confidence in her ability to "write on issues that have many interpretations" than the other two students.

In addition to the Writer's Block instrument, I collected information on these students from interviews at least twice a semester over their four year college careers after my semester as their instructor, asking them about their writing processes and experiences in their classes, as well as obtaining copies of most of their papers. I also analyzed between nine and eleven of their papers for each of them, over the span of their college careers, with Writer's Workbench, a computer textual analysis program. However, I am not including that analysis in this essay.

Here is my first assumption:

1.That once students learn the value of writing and revising, they will do it.

This was definitely eliminated from my assumption list. None of the three students used revising beyond English 111, the course that followed mine, unless it was demanded and structured by the instructor. Erica wrote about her struggle with revision in her English 111 class:

> To say what I know and feel, and to write it in a way that makes it comprehensible for others is truly hard for me. Many times it is also very tiring, especially those times when I need to rewrite a paper that I have already written. I am challenged to go inside the paper and to pick out words, sentences, and phrases that I may have thought I had written but had failed to communicate.

While revision was hard for her, Erica thought that she **should** write drafts, but she didn't take the time once she finished her first year English classes. Her papers were not carefully drafted and revised, at least not in any linear way. She did feel some discomfort about that. I had written to her during her junior year after she'd transferred to another college, inquiring if she'd changed any of her methods of writing papers. She read it as expectation, I think. She commented, "You're right about rewriting my papers and setting up drafts. I must admit that I do get lazy...and therefore stick with whatever shows up the first time instead of working it out."

Jill, the most academically successful of the three, was more pragmatic about it: no guilt for her. She described time and time again simply bringing a stack of books to a computer a day or night before the paper was due and cranking it out. Sometimes she'd do two drafts if it was a paper that was important to her, or she would meet deadlines in classes that demanded proposals or drafts, but certainly she did not fulfill my fondest dreams of gaining satisfaction out of crafting draft after draft.

Kevin, the weakest writer, wrote one draft only after his first year English courses, and didn't return to multiple drafts until his philosophy course during his junior year. Then his professor sent him to my office in the Academic Support Center under threat of not passing the course. He commented to me that he'd had to return to the methods he was required to use in his first year. This revisiting old methods wasn't with the pleasure of reacquainting himself with an old friend, more like a nemesis. He quickly returned to his lower investment method when he got out of the philosophy course.

2. That emphasis on the process is more likely to produce the instructor's definition of good writing.

If we deduce the instructor's definition from grades above B, this assumption proved to be true to some degree, but whether the process factor was the significant one is doubtful. Jill's favorite papers and those in which she was most successful (not always the same) were those that required intermediate deadlines requiring some attention to process. Coincidentally, these occurred in her areas of greatest expertise, dance and mass media. Kevin's favorite and best papers did not require drafts in the usual way we speak of them, and he didn't write more than one. Attention to process did not produce his best papers. He wrote more than one draft only when under considerable pressure.

The papers that were least successful both in the letter grade and in terms of satisfaction for Kevin and Jill were in areas where they felt like "Strangers in Strange Lands,"as Lucille

McCarthy identified students in her article about students' writing across the curriculum. Both of their worst experiences occurred in disciplines where argumentation is highly valued: philosophy and history where they particularly felt strange.

Kevin simply wasn't able to produce the academic distance on his philosophy of religion course. He was a strongly religious student who found it difficult to appraise the argument for God's existence since it was a fundamental part of his being. He tried in more than one draft, but he simply couldn't accommodate this very different way of thinking about his faith.

Jill found herself feeling like a stranger in a history class that she took for distribution. History majors sat in the front row, and they exchanged barbed confrontations with the professor and among themselves. She stopped going to class, and consequently didn't understand the expected approach of attacking the point of view of an assigned article, rather than supporting it. She got the lowest grade of her college career on her first paper, a C+, but pulled the next paper up to a B+ although she still got a C+ for the course, again, her lowest grade. The drafting process was not the issue here: classroom climate was.

3. That revision is the site for growth in writing and learning.

I've inferred instructors' definition of good writing as those papers that earned their authors "good" grades, that is to say, A's and B's. I'm defining "good learning" as learning in which students were invested beyond the grade, papers that connected to their lives in some way. Jill was often able to produce what professors called "good" writing without going beyond what Nelson and Hayes call a content-based approach, centering on "finding and assembling content" most of her academic career.(3) Her papers were primarily "knowledge-telling," in Bereiter and Scardamalia's terminology. She rarely involved herself enough, connected herself enough, to promote significant learning. Jill did assignments and did them quite well, but the assignments did not push her to much depth or alter her points of view. She rarely did research based on issues about which she was seriously concerned. Revision was not the site for growth in learning for her. However, she was willing to jump through the requisite hoops to get the preferred grade.

Kevin was also basically a content-based writer who focused on finding and assembling content. However, there were a couple of exceptions: his paper on school consolidation and one on school prayer. He held a strong opinion against school consolidation when he began his research for a speech course his sophomore year, but he was convinced otherwise by his research. He wrote a paper that he characterized as his best on that same topic in his junior year. He updated his research on the topic, so that paper could also be construed as a revision of his speech. He connected to the topic and integrated it into his opinions in this instance, but it was not the usual result of his research.

Erica almost always based her writing on issues that mattered to her. She looked for opportunities to write about racism, sexism,

relationships. She was curious about those issues, and worked at finding ways to deal with them in her course work. She learned constantly because she was curious and always sought out issues that mattered to her. In a course on Ancient Greece and Rome, she wrote about the influence of the Egyptians (seeing them as Africans) on the Romans. In a religion course she looked for feminist issues.

However, the writing that she produced wasn't always "good" in terms of grades earned. In my initial course in writing, she earned a low B because she just couldn't get interested in revising to demonstrate her learning, although I could certainly see that she reflected and learned a great deal. The learning, however, did not come through revision. For Erica, her learning was demonstrated more informally. Her journals showed her insights as did my interviews with her. Her grades improved over the four years, but her process of one writing session per paper changed only when required. However, writing on the computer is rarely just one draft in the traditional sense since revising can be instant and is not recorded. No doubt even Erica did some revision.

So, these assumptions get a maybe.

4. That students will improve at identifying the rhetorical situation.

This assumption gets a positive yes vote. All three students could claim that kind of improvement by the end of their college careers. Jill wrote successfully in a variety of disciplines. Erica had not only proved her ability to write in a variety of academic contexts, but she also wrote successfully for college newspapers, and she edited the newsletter at the Women's Center in Madison. Kevin wrote a devotion for the college congregation's Lenten booklet, and he presented a well-organized, persuasive chapel talk.

5. That students' confidence and competence will grow over time and practice.

This assumption also proved largely true. We had students fill out an attitude survey at the beginning of their first year, and Kevin also filled one out at the end of his senior year. Kevin's attitude as measured by the Writer's Block Questionnaire given in his first and senior year improved somewhat, particularly on these four items where he moved from "often" to "occasionally":

> 5. It is hard for me to write on topics that could be written about from a number of angles.
> 10. My teachers are familiar with so much good writing that my writing must look bad by comparison.
> 16. I find myself writing a sentence, then erasing it, trying another sentence, then scratching it out. I might do this for some time.
> 21. Writing is a very unpleasant experience for me.

Clearly his self-image in writing has moved from his first year when he described his writing as "scum of the earth."

However, Kevin's performance level proved to be a serious problem on the writing portion of the PPST which he took three times. He did finally pass it on the fourth try. Timed essays were clearly a problem. His performance, other than on the PPST, was satisfactory. He graduated with a low B average.

Jill did not respond to the request from our educational research office to fill out this survey again, but in an interview acknowledged that she had more confidence that she could write for a variety of professorial audiences.

Erica and I talked about these issues, and agreed that she had indeed increased her confidence and competence. Her attitude was warranted: she has a published essay on her experience with lupus in a recently published book on black women's health.

6. That students will come to find writing satisfying as they are successful.

There seemed to be little correlation between academic success and satisfaction. Erica came to college loving to write and left that way, even though she didn't get grades as high as Jill did. Although she was pleased with good grades, Erica's satisfaction came from her own insights, not outside evaluators'. Even though Jill was the most academically successful, she did not enjoy writing for the most part.

Preliminary Conclusions:

Coming at this topic from the students' view, not my usual faculty view, I learned a great deal. In "The Friendly Stranger: Twenty-Five Years as 'Other'," Janice Neuleib commented on the need to observe students (from the vantage point of "other") with some care. She noted the danger that it "may change us rather than them."(236) In fact, that is at least partly true for me. Clearly, several of my assumptions do not hold up to scrutiny from the perspective of these students' behavior. As I listen to other students, I am quite sure that their behavior is not isolated.

In the face of student pragmatism, faculty will need to ask themselves what their goals are for students in their courses. Do they want students to learn to examine issues and data in the same analytical, inquiring mode they do, or are they are more interested in having them look up information and produce "correct" academic writing. Is the thought process most important or the form in which the information appears?

If the thought process is more important, then we may need to reexamine what types of assignments are most effective. In **Academic Literacies** Elizabeth Chiseri-Starter argues for changes in assignments "with emphasis on many short assignments rather than one long paper; more informal writing such as journals, learning logs, and in-class exercises; evaluation procedures such as peer and self critiques to augment faculty feedback; techniques for responding to, not just grading writing" (157). All three students in the study learned from these types of strategies. Erica in particular seemed to learn best from

journals, both personal and academic. Formal argumentative papers in disciplines may not always provide the best vehicle for student growth. In addition, both Erica and Kevin gained from out-of-class writing for their peers.

St. Olaf has recently changed its writing requirements from a first year course and one course with the Advanced Writing Component (AWC) that I mentioned earlier to a four-course requirement with much broader goals. The guidelines of the four courses specifically ask faculty to "incorporate writing as a principal and integral part of learning." In addition, time is to be given "to discussing and critiquing written work and to conferring with students about their writing." It will take another study to see if our rethinking our goals for writing across the college succeed in changing students' attitude toward writing. We hope to help students see the value of writing beyond simply filling out a rhetorical form to satisfy an instructor. We need structures to encourage students' curiosities about issues to be explored, promoting high investment strategies in the learning if not the formal writing.

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